

The Clipper Visits... Nancy Oates

By MARTHA HIMES

Nancy Oates is not the woman she used to be.

"If my husband came back, not only would he not marry me, he wouldn't even date the new me," she said. "I am not the same person. I am not the little girl in the first grade that the nuns said, 'she stands in the corner and she doesn't talk to anybody, she's so shy.' No, I've grown up, big time."

Oates misses her husband very much, and mentions him frequently.



Dick Oates died in 1982 at the age of 53, leaving her with seven, out of nine, children still at home to support. Shy and afraid of public speaking, but in need of a job, the mourning mother gathered her courage and put her name on the ballot for Town Clerk.

"I had to achieve for my children," she explained.

Having grown up in Jamaica Plain, surrounded by Curleys and Tobins, and having a father who was State Engineer, head of all construction, Oates had been around politicians enough to know she didn't want to be one.

"I grew up literally despising politicians. And I think it's God's little joke on me that I became one," she said.

Her oldest daughter suggested that perhaps she could become a singer or a decorator. It was Oates's friend Bob Troy Sr. who came up with the idea that she should run for Town Clerk.

"He said to me, 'I was driving to New Hampshire with Winnie [his wife], and I said to her, 'Nancy could win that,'" Oates recalled. "And I thought, is he thinking of the New Hampshire Lottery, because there are fewer contestants?"

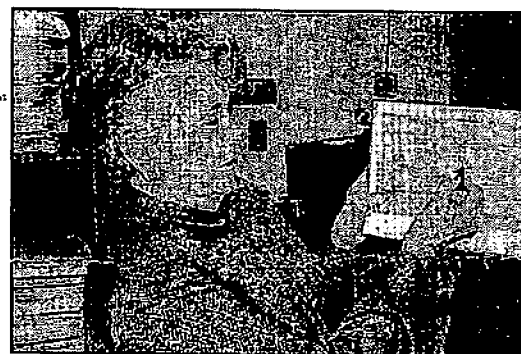
With Troy's support, in 1983 Oates campaigned for office. In fact, his entire street, Bow-sprit Lane, helped stump for the candidate. The seat was open and she was one of three contenders. She won the election by a mere four-vote lead over Martha MacFarland, who requested a recount.

"These were the famous Florida punch cards. Do I know about those! She got a hanging chad," Oates said. But Oates did not lose any votes in the recount, so in the end she beat MacFarland by three votes.

The new Town Clerk learned on the job. She credits a previous Town Clerk, Maurice Shirley, with being an enormous help to her for the first several months.

The Town Clerk's responsibilities include keeping the vital statistics for the town (marriages, births and deaths), licensing dogs, registering voters, receiving absentee ballots, certifying Board of Appeals cases, running elections, opening Town Meeting, and processing all the warrant articles through the Attorney General's office after Town Meeting.

She also collects the census forms, and is considering having a street contest to see which streets can fill out their census forms first. The census forms will be mailed in late January.



Oates demonstrates the proper technique for the now infamous "butterfly" ballot.

Right now, Oates and her assistant, Barbara Cook, are preparing for the general election on November 5. First, they run test ballots through the Accu-Vote machines, to make sure the machines are scanning correctly. Those ballots get checked for accuracy and sent up to the state.

They are also receiving absentee ballots. This year, they have to keep track of two sets of ballots, since the town has been split into two districts.

Shortly before the election, they run off the voter list used at the polls.

On Election Day, Oates gets to the polls at 4:45 a.m., and often stays until 10:00 or 11:00 at night. She is present to resolve any voter problems or discrepancies in the voter list.

"You run every election as

if there's going to be a recount," she advised.

The absentee ballots get scanned through the voting machines, just like the ballots filled out at the polls. Inside the ma-

chines is a memory card. After the polls close, the memory cards are removed and entered into a laptop computer, which calculates the vote totals.

Oates hopes that turnout for the November 5 election will be as high as 5,000 voters, out of a town total of just over 10,000. To achieve her sometimes uncannily accurate predictions of voter turnout, Oates counts the number of absentee ballots her office has received, and calculates that number as ten percent of total voter turnout.

Duxbury has two election-based items to be proud of, according to Oates. First, nearly 100% of Duxbury's eligible population is registered to vote. And second, in a presidential election, Oates said Duxbury achieves approximately a 98% voter turnout. Even the 50% that Oates estimates for next month's election is a figure many communities would be thrilled to achieve.

"We have very few people who are not voters. And we really come out to vote for a presidential election," she said.

Oates, 71, loves her job. "It's exhilarating," she said.

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The whole Oates clan turned out in their finest for the wedding this summer of youngest daughter Katie.

"It's never the same. And I love helping people." She is considering running again when her office expires in 2004.

Oates's assistant Cook has high praise for the Town Clerk. "She's an amazing person," Cook said. "She's really perfect for the job. She has a sharp memory. And she has a good sense of humor."

But the job Oates is proud of is that of wife and mother. That's why, in the Town List, she specifies her occupation as "Homemaker," instead of Town Clerk.

"I still consider myself a wife, even though I don't have

a husband, definitely a mother because I still have children, and thirdly, a Town Clerk," she said.

One of her prized possessions is a letter written to the *New York Times Magazine* by her daughter Marie. In it, Marie writes: "...it is clear to me that my four brothers and four sisters were the best presents my parents ever gave me....Being from a large family taught my siblings and me how to make the most of fewer things and enjoy each other more in the process...not a bad way of life."

Oates is gratified that she has raised nine happy, accomplished and close-knit children who appreciate and love each other. And now she is helping to raise two of her grandchildren, who live with her in her home on Puritan Way: Erin Haskell, who is attending Framingham State College, and Julie Haskell, who is a sophomore at Duxbury High School.

But one, very important, person is absent: her husband Dick. "He was a quiet man, but now that he's gone, our house is silent. I still miss him, deeply," Oates said.